

A Critical Study of “Kapparkovai”: A Compendium on Ships

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“Kapparkovai”: A High Literary Quality of Work

This has been a Tamil poetical work published in 1958. The western scholars like K. V. Zvelebil appreciated the high literary quality of the work, noting¹ that, “*In 1958, an anonymous literary work appeared in print entitled Karumanickan Kapparkovai. The hereo is probably Karumanickan, a Pandya general, mentioned in the 7th year of Maravarman Tribhuvana Cakravarti Parakkirama Pandya, A. D. 1341². The kovai has 400 stanzas in praise of Karumanickan, a Yatava chieftain, ruler of Kappalur. Its literary qualities are high. The date may indeed be the middle of the 14th century*”. Comparing “Kovai”-type works, S. Srinivasa Iyer asserted that it could be dated prior to 17th century as the works like “Ilakkana vilakkam” dated to c.1658 or 17th century with commentary by Sri Vaidhyanatha Desikar of Tiruvarur, Thanjavur District, Tamilnadu³ had profusely quoted verses from Kapparkovai. However, based on inscriptional evidences, it could be dated to 14th century. The scattered poems of the work were available in “Thanippadal Tirattu”, Vol.II, but subsequently, two manuscripts were discovered in the collection of V. V. Swaminatha Iyer kept in the library. It contained 399 verses, though one verse has been repeated, thus the number of verses is 398 only. M. Ilakkuvanar first discussed about it⁴. Thus, these scholars have not gone beyond the scope of appreciating the literately flavor.

“Kapparkovai” – A Compendium on Ships: Literally “kovai” means joining together orderly in a specific arrangement, like joining pearls or beads with a thread by passing them through the fine holes of pearls made of precious metals or stones. Thus, “Kapparkovai” has been a beautiful poetry about ships compiled and presented, if interpreted differently. Though, a plain reading of the work appears that it is some sort of “Kalaviyal” i.e., “secret love”, a characteristic feature of Tamil tradition and poetics, a careful and critical reading of verses shows that the poet has chosen the title purposely

and the subject, incorporating details about ship. Otherwise, the poet would have called it “Kadalkovai” (compendium of love), “Kalaviyakovai” (compendium of secret-love) etc., instead of “Kapparkovai”. As “Kappal” – ship has been taken for the title of the work, its place and significance in the work has to be analyzed and studied.

The mystery about the “Kapparkovai”: As already pointed out, the work contains 398 verses only, though the number was assigned to 400. The details about the disappearance, tracing of the manuscript and publishing in the form of a book have been shrouded in mystery. In my previous papers⁵, I have pointed out about the disappearance of Tamil palm-leaf books, parts of books and specifically the books on shipping, shipping technology or books that gave data and information on such subjects. Some examples are given below:

- Kapparsattiram (only part is available).
- Navaisattiram (only part is available).
- Nigamasigamani (not available)
- The first and tenth Ten of Paditruppattu (It is mentioned because, it gives the pan-Indian expedition of the Cera kings, which is often dubbed as poetic myth).
- Civaga Cintamani (dated to 9th-10th centuries) mentions about the existence of “books on the knowledge of Oceans” (verse no. 882) and Colleges (verse no.995).
- Kappal-neruppu pattiya apaya chindu⁶ (catalogued in the library of British Museum)

Coming to “Kapparkovai”, M. Raghava Iyengar has given interesting details about the existence, disappearance and recovery of it⁷. A copy of the work was given to Madurai Tamil Sangam for publication by one Sri Devasarpiran Kavirayar of Azhvar Tirunagari, but before its publication, it was reportedly burned to ashes along with the other valuable manuscripts in fire accident⁸. When Srinivasa Iyer started editing another available manuscript, he could find only 398 poems instead of 400 and thus two poems were missing⁹. Anyway, the printed edition came out in 1958.

The hero of the work – Karumanickan: As per the internal evidences of the work, the hero of the work has been Karumanickan, who was ruling an area comprising Kappalur (the city of Ships) and Thuvurai (Dwaraka, but not the one in Gujarat¹⁰) of Pandya Kingdom. He also worked as a Minister and Commander of Pandya Kings. The other details along with ship, as found in the work are as follows:

- His name Karumanickan is mentioned in the most of the poems. The other names and expressions used to denote him are – Thondaiarkon, Thondaiman, Tondaivendan, Kaithavan (93), Tuvaraimannan (58, 87), Tuvaraikoman (166), thus, he is considered as a Pandya King, or ruler of certain Pandyan territory and also associated with Thuvurai or Dwaraka (121, 123, 133, 166, etc). Kalingarkon (43) is also mentioned implying that he was a conqueror or ruler of Kalingadesa also. Viranarayanan is also mentioned (127).
- He was having ships, protector of ships (79), builder of ship (71), compared and addressed as ship (68, 69), his flag was with shark (106) pertinent to the seafaring activities.

- His city is mentioned as "Kappalur" i.e, city of Ship. It is also mentioned that the ships used to go round his city implying that his city was either an island or a port with such facilities of embankment, cargo handling etc.
- He was in army in the winning battles against several north Indian kings (42, 47, 179) and capturing lands of Kannada King (396) and a King of Kadava (223). Here, "Kadava" land is mentioned as the land of Pallavas or implying Pallavas even in the 13th century is significant as their physical presence was not at all there. In other words considering the continuous maritime tradition of the Satavahanas, Pallavas, Cholas and others of the area, the particular king "Kadava" might have been equated with the Palavas, because of the past association.
- Interestingly, in another poem (42), he is mentioned as the conqueror of Vanga, Konga and northern kings and thus known as "Gangaikondan" i.e, the conqueror of the Ganges. It is well known that the expression "Gangaikondan" refers to Rajendra Chola only. In another place (227), the expression "Gangaikku vayantha" connotes the meaning as "Gangaikonda" i.e, the conqueror of the Ganges. In another poem also, he is described as "Gangai thodum kappal kavalan" (252) i.e, the protector or captain of a ship that touched the Ganges. However, these references point to internal and river navigation.
- His brother's name is mentioned as Kalingarkon (King of Kalinga or ruler of Utkala and Odhisa). That he is also referred to as Kalingarkon has already been pointed out. Perhaps, this shows their relation with the Kalingas.
- The expressions used to think about Rajendra Chola only, however, Ragahva Iyengar tried to equate him with "Jatavarma Sundara Pandyan" of 13th century based on the inscriptional evidences¹¹.
- In fact, in another poem (363), the expression used to denote a status of an officer acquired under Rajendra Chola is used to him¹². This title "Perunthiram" was given to Mummudic Chozha Pirammadhirayan, a commander of Rajaraja and this is supported by inscriptional evidence. This also proves that the poet was well aware of the contemporary inscriptions available for reference.
- He is also alluded to have conquered Lanka (325), Vangam (42), Kongar (42), Vadavarasar (42), areas of Ganges (42).
- In two poems (255, 358), he is connected with the river Vaigai. However, the cities mentioned were away from the river Vaigai. Otherwise, the cities mentioned Kappalur and Thuvarai must have been near to Vaigai.

Thus, as the references point to the Cholas only and hence the forefathers of Karumanickan might be an able commander, pilot or navigator, who participated in the oversea expeditions of the Cholas perhaps along with Rajendra. Thus, such association is reflected in the eulogization of him by the poet in the context.

Methodology applied to study the work: it is found that the Tamil work has been couched and masqueraded with love and entire narration has been love between the hero and his lady-love, her

beauty part described in by part comparing with natural elements, her characters matching with the flora and fauna and his union with her and so on, as usual dealt with in any Agam (Internal domestic affairs) and Kalaviyal (The secret activities of man and woman in – love and love-making) theme of Tamil poetry. However, a careful and critical reading has revealed that the poet has in fact, compared a ship with a woman to bring out the details of the subject. In fact, in one place, even the union of hero / lover with his lady-love has been compaed with ship and sailing. Thus, to decode and decipher the intention of the poet, the understanding of the words and expressions used is very much required. Kumbu, ithai, kayiru, kodi, pay, kazhi etc., are parts of a ship. Thus, the poems are read, the unique words and expressions are grouped and tabulated, as they have been different from ordinary love-poetry, but have different connotations. The words and expressions associated with sea / ocean, aquatic birds (125)/ animals (82), maritime / navigational significance, ship / voyage are treated separately and the implied meaning is brought out. In many places, they have been explicitly mentioned and in some place implicitly cited for comparison.

The details mentioned about navigation and maritime activities: The mentioning of some examples have not been accidental, but intentional to drive out the point.

1. The Indian cosmological and cosmogonic representation of the globe with eight cardinal points (79, 267, 131). This brings out the fact that not only the eight cardinal points of the globe or terrestrial plan with oceans was known, but also the location of places with reference to known longitude and latitude.
2. Measurer of three worlds or the globe trotter (54) or during the material period, he might have visited the places of all the seven continents, implying his maritime voyages undertaken. This is correlated and corroborated by the Indians carrying out maritime trade with many other countries.
3. The movement of planets, asterism (104), asterism associated with moon (104), eclipses (55), pole star (279) etc show that they knew the facts of stellar navigation and terrestrial cartography.
4. The seven identifiable raised mountains / land masses / continents as sailors recognized (8, 79, 131, 225, 398, 399) point to the known seven continents: 1. Arctic, 2. Asia, 3. Europe, 4. North America, 5. South America, 6. Australia and 7. Antartica (of course, these names were not used).
5. Time reckoning (83, 84), there were people who were watching the morning and evening from dawn to dusk i.e, they were observing the movement of sun and recording the shadows at a particular place implying Sun-dial (83). As since the period of “Surya Siddhanta”, Indians were knowing such facts, it is not surprising that the 14th century poet knew and used in his poetry.
6. Upheavals, raised waves crossing the boundaries (57), because of the turbulent movements of oceanic waters, the shanks were thrown on the shores (75), churning of ocean (32, 63, 113), landmass emergence (113), submergence (113, 186), lightning (104), periodical storms (229) etc., only show either the poet was aware of such facts made known throuh the sailors or observed in his life time, as now we could know and understand the effects of natural

calamities like Tsunami, landslides occurred in north India with the disappearance of buildings etc.

7. Parts of ship (7, 62), ship laden with goods (267), different types of ships – fearful ships, reaching ships, controlled ships and returned ships (252) i.e, ships engaged for various naval activities etc also prove the fact of such knowledge of the material period.
8. Different types of tools used: azhi (teethed wheel, circular saw), leuvi (emery paper?), ee (arrow or sharp weapon / tool), eelam (colloidal solution, an adhesive)
9. Geographical knowledge (42), southern parts of India touched by the cold waves of ocean (384)
10. Nymph (kadalkanni), semi-divine maiden of sea, sea-goddess with half upper woman part and half bottom fish part is mentioned (90), in fact, he is mentioned as the “King of Nymph” implying that the sea goddesses protected him always, whenever, wherever he undertaken such maritime activities. Niranangu / water goddess is also mentioned.
11. Ship losing its directions (252) – implies as to how ships might have wrecked and drowned due to natural calamities.
12. Kambul = a bird comes and sits on the ship (125) – this description is consistent with the other works available like Kappalsattiram and Navaisattiram, where, such references have been given i.e, with the presence of certain birds, the facts of nearing landmass, island, change of climate, approach of storm and other events could be understood in advance.
13. His connection with the Dwaraka or western coast has been mentioned repeatedly and forcefully. This could imply the link of Tamil Kings with the counterparts of the western coast. Particularly, the Kadambas, who were also dominant maritime force of the western coast had similarities with the Tamil Kings, particularly, the Cholas.

Mythological events mentioned connected with maritime activities: There have been many similes used, but few examples have been taken for illustrative purpose in the context.

1. Agasthya controlling the turbulent, stormy oceans symbolically drinking or capturing in his Kamandala (312).
2. Lakshmi is mentioned as the “Goddess of oceanic upheavals” (367).
3. Building bridge to Lanka across the ocean (268, 368), filling the ocean (368) i.e, with stones implying the building of bridge, burning of ocean by Rama (164),
4. Certain rare shanks produced from ocean (392)
5. Krishna obstructing the Sun with his disc thus, creating darkness or shortening of day time implying an astronomical event occurred (10, 68, 258) specifically a complete Solar eclipse.
6. Sun raiding chariot with one wheel, going round eight mountains, seven oceans, eight directions, four cardinal points (398)
7. Krishna and his many activities have been mentioned meticulously implying the connection of Karmanickan with the Dwaraka or western coast.

These are only illustrative and not exhaustive.

Identification of the cities mentioned: The repeatedly mentioned cities are Kappalur and Thuvarai and both were located in Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu only¹³ in 1958. Kappalur is now near to Madurai and far away from the seacoast. Thuvarai is also identified with Thuvarangkurichi¹⁴ far away from the seacoast. Therefore, the description given in the work do not match these two cities at all. Therefore, necessarily, they have to be located along the Coromandel Coast. Accordingly, certain port cities found on the eastern coast viz., Kalingapatnam, Dwarakanagar along with Puri, Kakinada, Machillipatnam tempt researchers to look into such port-cities, as they had maritime contacts with Southeast Asian countries. Incidentally, in Odhisa, there is one Manikpur / Manikapatna / Manikpatnam is located on the sand by strip between the Chilka lake and sea¹⁵. As Karumanickan is also mentioned as Kalingarkon (43), i.e, the king, ruler or conqueror of Kalinga, his city may be located here also. Unlike the Kappalur located in Pudukkottai, these cities are not only on the coast, but also have been connected with the maritime activities since time immemorial. Particularly, during the medieval period, they were very active. Thus, the ships always anchoring, going round, engaged in import and export of goods etc., suit with the poetic description as given of these port-cities rather than the land locked cities located in Pudukkottai. The Kalinga-Chola encounters had been not only o ferocious, but also reconciliatory. One Jata Chola was killed by the Kalingas as the Kalinga inscriptions mention¹⁶. One Vanapati won the Cholas in 998 CE, when Rajaraja, father of Chodaganga, was the king of Kalinga¹⁷. Rajaraja was married to Rajasundari daughter of Rajjendra Chola. However, Kalittungabarani praises the victory of the Cholas over Kalingas. Incidentally, the suddden disappearance of the Imperial Cholas (975-1250 CE) has been a mystery. Thus, though the influence of the Tamil Kings cannot be ruled out, the continuous maritime activities the Tamilagam coasts appeared to have stopped or details not available after the advent of the Europeans, particularly, the British on the Coromandel Coast.

Cross-verification with inscriptions: Kappalur was a famous place in 12th-13th centuries CE under the Pandiya rule and under the control of feudatory Karyamanickam. His name has been found in many inscriptions throughout the Tamil country. He was the signatory in many inscriptions and a remarkable donor too several temples. A Rajaraja Chola inscription gives the following details¹⁸: “*This is dated in the 10th year of Rajakesarivarman (Rajaraja I) ‘the victor of Kandalur-salai’, and records an endowment of 140 kasu by one Tali Pulichchanan of Kappalur in [Ura]tturkkuurram for feeding two Brahmanas every day in the temple of Tiruvisalur-Perumal (With the offering made to god), for anointing the images of the deity with scent (sandal ?) and for waving incense before the god, and for burning a perpetual lamp. With this amount 40 kuli of land is said to have been purchased (by the temple authorities as permanent investment)*”. Here, it is evident that “Kappalur” was connected with “Rajaraja I ‘the victor of Kandalur-salai’ and thus, linked to the ships and maritime activities.

Another inscription dated to 1265 CE records¹⁹, “.....kalattur-parru to the temple of Tirukkalukkunra. Mudaiya-nayanar at Tirukkalukkunram in kalattur-kottam in Jayangondasola mandalam for offerings during the Kalingarayan-sandhi established by Kappaluru daiyan karumanikka alias Kalingarayar of kappalur alias Ulagalandasolanallur in Mutturru-kkurram in Pandi-mandalam and for the festival held in Aippasi on the day of Puradam, the natal star of

Kalingarayarthe gift of the village Karumarampakkameri, made tax-free by the people (nattar) of...“. Here also, Kappalur is connected with “Kalingayayar,” implying Karumanickam.

K. V. Raman pointed out one Kappalur²⁰, “The mukhamandapa right in its front (G.P. No. 30) was also constructed sometime around A.D. 1259 by one Vanga-Kalingarayan of Kappalur whose portrait sculpture in bas-relief is found in the wall of the mandapa with an inscription which reads ‘Kappalur-udayan~vanga-kalingarayan-Tirumandapam’. The inscription does not bear a date, but we know from other sources that he was a feudatory of the Pandyan king Vira-Pandya who came to the throne in A.D. 1253²¹. The construction of this mandapa might have taken place a few years later than that date. The architectural features of the structure support the date.” As the rule was transferred to Pandyas from the Cholas, naturally, the feudatories were also covered under their rule. The expressions “Kappalur-udayan” and “vanga-kalingarayan,” clearly point to Karumanickam.

Conclusion

Just being a poet, the author of “Kapparkovai”, he could not have composed incorporating such details as described above, to exhibit his poetic fantasy or embellished wordy presentation. Therefore, the anonymous poet of this work must have had knowledge of navigation and maritime activities, as otherwise, he could not have recorded such minute details in the context to drive out the facts. When Christopher Columbus (1401-1506 CE), Magellan (1480-1521) and others were struggling to reach their desired places, because of their “longitude problems”, it is significant that the poet had such ideas very clearly in mentioning cities and places in his poetic work. Unfortunately, as the works of Indians were taken away by the Arabs, Europeans and others, Indian researchers have not been in a position to assess the actual position of Indians in the maritime history.

In such conditions only, the works like “Kapparkovai” come to fill up the gap and throw new light and clarify the position. As could be noted from the listed works above, there had been specific technical works on shipbuilding etc., but unfortunately, now not available, as they were / have been taken away as pointed out. Now, as the geographical area under study has also been divided based on political, social and linguistic basis, there has not been any combined, correlative and corresponding study about the just recent past. Therefore, even in the case of past 500 or 1000 years history study is hampered with such recently created barriers. When the Cholas, Andhras, Kalingas, Vangas, Palas, Gahadhavals and others were having maritime, marital and other friendly relationships, as recorded in their respective inscriptions, the present people of the same geographical area look at historical issues in a different angle.

Thus, here, the comparative, correlative and corresponding study made about the Tamil literary work “Kapparkovai” with the inscriptional evidences, it is borne out to show that the work was composed with the contemporary knowledge prevailed. Particularly, the cooperation among the South Indian kingdoms up to Ganges is revealed, in spite of their localized and competitive oppositions and differences. Thus, the prevalence of shipbuilding, shipbuilding technology and connected expertise of the 14th century cannot be denied and hence the existence of such technology before that period i.e, from the rise of the Cholas as maritime power, about 11th century ad disappearance in 13th century also cannot be doubted and denied. If the disappeared and not-recovered

works mentioned above are made available to Indian researchers, more facts could be brought out in the context.

Notes and References

1. Betold Spuler, *Handbook of Oriental Studies*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands, 1975. See Chap.X, K. V. Zvelebil, *Late Medieval period (A. DS. 1200-1750)*, Part.2, p.225.
2. M. Raghava Iyengar, *Sasanat Tamizh Kavi Saritham*, (The History of Tamil Poets based on inscriptions), pp.112. Also see SII, Vol.IV, p.112 and ARE 92 of 1935-36.
3. S. Srivivasa Iyer (Ed.), *Kapparkovai*, Mahamahopadhyaya V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, Madras, 1958, pp.xxi.
4. Mu. Ilakkuvanar, *Centamil*, No.6, 1907-08.
5. K. V. Ramakrishna Rao, *The Shipping Technology of Colas*, a paper presented during the 27th session of South Indian History Congress held at Rajapalayam from Feb. 2 4, 2007, and published in the PSIHC, Rajapalayam, 2007, pp.338-342.
6. L. D. Barnett, G. U. Pope (Eds.), *Catalogue of the Tamil books in the library of British Museum*, p.427.
7. M. Raghava Iyengar, *Karumanickam agiya Kapparkovai*, (Karumanickam alias Kapparkovai) in Araychittogothi (Compilation of Research papers), Tamil University, Thanjavur, 1984, pp.455-459.
8. S. Srivivasa Iyer (Ed.), *Kapparkovai*, Mahamahopadhyaya V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, Madras, 1958, pp.xxi-xxii.
9. M. Raghava Iyengar, *Araychittogothi*, opt.cit, p.459.
10. The submerged Dwaraka has been excavated by S. R. Rao of National Institute of Oceanography.
11. M. Raghava Iyengar, *Sasanat Tamizh Kavi Saritham*, (The History of Tamil Poets based on inscriptions), pp.106-108.
12. South Indian Inscriptions, Vol.2, pp.161-163.
13. Srivivasa Iyer (Ed.), *Kapparkovai*, Mahamahopadhyaya V. Swaminatha Iyer Library, Madras, 1958, p.xxiii
14. Thuvarankurichi (also spelt Tovarankurichchi) is a town in Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu, India.
15. It is situated at the entrance of an inlet or small river leading to great Chilika Lake. It was situated 64 Km from Ganjam .The chain of Mountain extending along the coast terminates in several hills to the north of the latter, leaving between them and the shore a low level of plain of reddish soil, where it fronts the sea. Ships sailing the coast used to approach the shore occasionally in 60 or 72 feet of water. From this place the sand bank said to project 3.2 Km. on which the water shoals suddenly from 240 ft. of water. So a ship or vessel should therefore, to avoid it in passing by not coming under 66 or 72 feet of water. From Manikpatnam to Puri the coast extends about E.N.E.
16. S. N. Rajaguru, *Inscriptions or Orissa, (c.600-1000 AD)*, Bhuwaneswar, 1960, Vol.II, p. 367
17. S. N. Rajaguru, *Inscriptions or Orissa, (c.1045-1190 AD)*, Bhuwaneswar, 1960, Vol.III, Part-I, p. 24
18. No.41 (Page No. 19) (A. R. No. 41 of. 1907) Tiruvisalur, Kumbhakonam Taluk, Tanjavur District, Sivayoganatha temple— on the same wall of the mandapa in front of the central shrine, Rajaraja I : year 10 : 994-95 CE.
19. No. 61 (Page No. 38) (A. R. No. 59 ofhi, 1909), Tirukkalikkunaram, Chingleput Taluk, Chingleput District
On the north wall of the kitchen in the Bhaktavatsalesvara temple, left of entrance. Jatavarman Virapandyadeva: Year 13. This record, in characters of about the 13th century CE., given details of date, viz., Tula, su. 6, Friday, Mulam which may correspond to 1265 CE., October 16, f.d.t. 20; the nakshatra ended on the previous day at 67.
20. K.V. Raman, *Sri Varadarajaswami Temple – Kanchi*, Abhinav Publishers, New Delhi, 1975, p. 48
21. This information is found in an inscription vide 59 of 1919—V. Rangacharya, Top List, Vol. I, p. 341.